Image, Visual Culture and Advertising: Intersections and Plural Universes

Imagem, Cultura Visual e Publicidade: Convergências e Universos Plurais

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The introduction to this issue of *Vista* journal, whose thematic section delves into advertising and visual culture, requires a broad look, yet brief, touching upon some of the related topics which, in themselves, are inexhaustible universes. The image is one of these entities, and, in this sense, it is fundamental to this text. Perhaps that is why we felt the need to give it a certain temporal breadth, to fix it within this historical perspective, to demonstrate its importance in the construction of the individual and, hence, of society, keeping in view what is perhaps the most decisive question: what is the image, anyway?

Given the purpose of this text and its size constraints, it is a concise outline touching upon the complexities of the image, intending to establish a basis for reflection and exploring related themes such as advertising and visual culture.

"Seeing is a complex affair". In this straightforward manner, devoid of unnecessary sophistication, poet Fernando Pessoa introduces the image and its interaction with us, uncovering the bond we share and the stories it conveys within its inherently flexible nature. It is the first manifestation because seeing comes before words (Berger, 1972), and it always wants to tell us, show us or manifest something, however elusive that revelation may be.

The image has traced humanity's journey since ancient times. As such, it has always been a support bringing order to chaos, encapsulating the multiple amplitudes, the inexhaustible extensions that define it. Plato and Aristotle, reflecting two foundational perspectives of our civilisation, "defined" this angular opening on semantics, its purposes, and its relationship with those who look at it. One of the oldest references to "image" is provided by Plato in the *Republic:* "I call images first of all shadows, then the reflections we see in water or on the surface of opaque, polished and shiny bodies and all representations of this kind" (as cited in Joly, 1994/1999, p. 13). Aristotle, on the other hand, elevated the image to levels of hedonism, liberation, information and even a certain voluptuousness.

In a complementary dimension, the mirror image, a product image according to another, is "linked to notions of similarity, likeness, reflection, representation, mimesis and imitation", which refers to analogy (Mota-Ribeiro, 2002, p. 95). Thus, according to Gian Paolo Caprettini (1994), the concept of "copy", "even if only seen as a naive consideration", suggests that

> the image would do nothing more than "approximate" in some way a distant object in space and/or time, (...) as if there were true models somewhere that were then copied (and these copies could only be diminished copies of that model). (p. 177)

Divergent perspectives on defining an image highlight the basic premise that its meaning cannot be circumscribed. This leads to an inherent impossibility of authoritative clarity in the increased and permanent tension between analogy and code (Melot, 2007/2017). The image has a totalising stance, aspiring to embody everything and its opposite — it is "visual and immaterial, mobile and immobile, sacred and profane, ancient and contemporary, tied to life and death, analogical, comparative, conventional, expressive, communicative, constructive and deconstructive, beneficial and threatening" (Joly, 1994/1999, p. 27). It does not seem to be a mere concept but rather one of the primary mechanisms for organising society (Francastel, 1988/2000), a force that has persisted since ancient times. One could argue that the image has not just represented us; it has created and continues to shape us. We, too, are images!

In discussing the new images, those that come to us today in a mind-boggling welter, they "do not occupy the same ontological level as traditional images

because they are phenomena without parallel in the past" (Flusser, 2012, p. 16). Today's images, unlike those of yesteryear, are the result of dots and pixels, composed of zeros and ones, which, according to the philosopher, brings them closer to the abyss of zero-dimensionality. In a different vein, Moisés Martins (2011) emphasises the continuity of images that have always threatened Western *logos*. He underscores how the image inherently harbours "the *virtus* of separation", virtuality linked to the "intrinsic force of a separate world" (p. 71).

The struggle to define the image as a singular entity, or even to grasp its diverse forms, is an impossibility that often arises in various circumstances. This challenge, particularly in the expansive field of communication, showcases the image's might as an object of observation. Its might lies not just in being observed but in its appropriation. It is not only a source of visual pleasure but a tool for manipulation, as already noted. The entire history of civilisations is also the history of influences, largely nefarious and surreptitious, exerted on individuals. The history of propaganda, which heavily relies on images, stands as a powerful testament to how this has had profound implications for the course of history. Examples abound, from Alexander the Great, who had his effigy depicted on coins as if he were a Greek god, to much more recently, Goebbels, who proved to be a powerful connoisseur of the potential of spectacle and image in Nazi Germany (Thomson, 1999/2000). Statues, idols, architecture and many other expressions have always been powerful instruments and continue to be so today.

The legacy of time brings us glimpses from one of the structuring civilisations of humanity, the Sumer. The Sumerians and their Semitic descendants highlighted the profound significance that the dynamics of observation held in those ancient eras. They ingeniously combined images and text on ceramic artefacts, creating well-balanced graphic compositions. As noted by Oliver Thomson (as cited in Mesquita, 2018), "the elaborate inscriptions organised in public spaces to boost new dynasties and damn their predecessors are a standard feature of Sumerian propaganda, for example those of Urukagina and Lagash from 2,350 BC, stand out as a defining characteristic of Sumerian propaganda" (p. 24). The protohistoric Mesopotamian society showcased a sophisticated communication system involving writing and organised state structures (Quintero, 1993/1993), ultimately, the idea of the image as a vessel representing time. This underscores the diverse roles of the image in a phenomenology that demonstrates its inherent complexity and influential presence, even in the earliest societies, as a "persuasive" instrument, which is perhaps the determining factor in an entire history that has brought us this far.

Propaganda, as a persuasive technique, laid the groundwork for mental, social, and technological mechanisms that advertising later appropriated. Rooted in the present and a successor to that era, Sut Jhally (1987/1995) contends that advertising is the "most influential institution of socialisation" (p. 13), shaping media, constructing identities, and transforming merchandise into meaning rather than merely reflecting it.

How can we possibly overlook the image, constructed but perpetually constructive in its intimate connection with advertising? In what way can we contemplate visual culture, particularly in postmodern times, as shaped by practices of visuality that not only underpin it but also form its essence in every communicative occurrence?

Our understanding of the image (despite its mentioned contradictions) is inclusive, embracing the *broadest* sense. Matthew Rampley's work (2005), for example, broadens this notion in its summary, highlighting that visual culture includes not only images, but also other visual media such as fashion, architecture, among others, also encompassing advertising. We are pondering whether, rather than solely acknowledging images in visual culture, we should broaden the discourse to encompass various visual media. Shouldn't we consider visual culture as a blend of imagery and imaginary, in line with Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999), recognising it as a field driven by the current need to "interpret the postmodern globalisation of the visual as everyday life" (p. 3). Visual culture does not depend on "pictures" themselves but the modern tendency to picture or visualise existence (Mirzoeff, 1999). It is also our firm belief, aligned with Mirzoeff's stance, that visual culture finds its essence in the crucial fact that "the disjunctured and fragmented culture that we call postmodernism is best imagined and understood visually" (Mirzoeff, 1999, p. 3).

Given this context, it is essential to focus on the role of the "image" and visual culture in the wider culture in which they fit. Here, the latter does not just denote different visual or other forms but rather "practices shared by a group, community or society, through which meaning is generated (...) from a world of representations" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 3). It aligns with Stuart Hall's idea of culture as processes or practices wherein individuals and groups produce meaning about various manifestations (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). Visual culture's essence lies in everyday life, visualities, practices of visualisation, and the specifics of image-based communicative events. It finds its ground in the experiences of confrontation with images, potentially because practices related to images are the essence of everyday life itself.

This overwhelming predominance of the image, essential in the postmodern world, has led to its demonisation — the visual described as a "cancer" (De Certeau, 1980) or termed as "pornographic" (Jameson, 1990). The visual overload, the schizophrenia of the urban landscape, the inability to understand the world without images, and the immediacy hindering the establishment of filters all contribute to this perception, especially in advertising. Whether online (social networks, especially Instagram — the name does not contradict it is designed for instant imagery) or offline (giant screens in Times Square or lengthy television adverts), advertising is a field particularly subject to criticism, evoking "visual pollution".

However, the image, as discussed earlier referring to Joly (1994/1999) and Martins (2011), embodies contradictory traits, both hopeful and ruinous, heavenly and demonic. Advertising, like the "image", has been a vast territory for criticism

but also a land of creativity, fascination, and sublime beauty — perhaps a blend of "satisfaction mixed with horror" (Kant, as cited in Mirzoeff, 1999, p. 16). If advertising lacked the power to fascinate ("fascination" in the aesthetic sense), to "squeeze the throat" (Delacroix, as cited in Huisman, 1961/1981), or to contain within itself the seeds of its own downfall and yet maintain its incredible fascination, the absolute need to clearly place it within the domain of the image and visual culture would not be so pressing.

Coming back to advertising as a mirror and reflection of the time it mimics, it ought to serve as a beacon to point the way to the future through its linguistic-iconic discourse. Whether in the dreamlike evocation of a message about a particular perfume, in the persuasive rhetoric of a specific commodity, the advocacy for pro-environmental attitudes, or in the imagistic construction of synthesised images from artificial intelligence, among many others. There are demanding challenges that require reflection, where advertising can and should insert its discourse. One of these challenges is time and the way we deal with it, with its speed, characterised by the vertigo of instantaneity. Another, somewhat absent, is the complexity of life and the contemporary narratives it introduces. Inebriated as we are by tumultuous times, advertising could play a pivotal role in providing new generations with a stable ground rooted in hope and the construction, sharing, co-creation, environmental preservation and equitable distribution of resources.

This Issue of *Vista*

Advertising has been particularly explored in communication sciences. It is increasingly relevant today in the broad field of visual culture, aesthetics and visualities, visual studies, semiotics and image analysis in its many representations.

This issue of *Vista* intends to spark discussion by delving into various topics such as advertising, design, image, and other pluralities. It explores the intersections of advertising with artificial intelligence and "digitalities", as well as the impact of the speed of complex time in contemporary narratives. Additionally, it examines the relationship between advertising, semiotics, rhetoric, and cognitive processes, alongside its influence on new generations. Furthermore, it explores the dialogues between marketing, advertising, and the market itself. The theme of "advertising and visual culture" offers a broad scope for numerous reflections and studies. It provides space for diverse, contradictory approaches that engage in a dialogue among the universes connected to the triangle of "image, visual culture, advertising". This sphere contains fascinating disjunctions, fragmentations, and disruptions that continuously challenge and question us with their complexities.

The spirit of the times, the *zeitgeist*, condenses an endless number of doubts and paradoxes, fuelled by a dynamic of their own, often evading our understanding. Or rather, perhaps we can understand a fragment of it, moulded by our experience

and knowledge. However, this does not mean that construction, in this frantic movement of the world, allows advertising, in its pluralities, to be an effective observatory of trends and, at the same time, a teeming field of meditation, action and construction in diversity. After all, "when we consume goods, we are satisfying material and social needs at the same time" (Vestergaard & Schroder, 1985/1988, p. 5). There is nothing new, of course, in this trajectory of overproduction and consumerism that has defined the times and which, paradoxically, seems to be getting worse. If this is the case, the role of advertising, which can be considered most relevant, is to provide conscious meanings that encapsulate the essential issues of our era. Without diminishing its primary purpose, it is also partly responsible for being a protagonist in the creation of time, with repercussions for the future...

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